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REPRESENTATION OF ISLAM AND MUSLIMS IN WESTERN FILMS: AN “IMAGINARY” MUSLIM COMMUNITY

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Abstract

This article provides a textual and visual analysis of Hirsī Ali and van Gogh’s controversial short film *Submission* (2004) and Marc Forster’s *The Kite Runner* (2007). Emphasis is placed on rhetorical and plot strategies, aimed at reinforcing unproductive Orientalist stereotypes of Islam and Muslims. The aim of this analysis is to find out how Muslims and Islam are presented in *Submission* and *The Kite Runner*, based on E. Said’s (1978) work “Orientalism” and to identify Theo van Gogh’s assassination, influenced public attitudes towards Muslims. The following means are used to reach the aim: to analyze the concept of Orientalism and stereotypes, connections with the media and the influence of popular culture on their expression; to find out the role of the Muslim minority in the process of constructing social reality (stereotypes); to analyze how Muslims and Islam are presented in the films *Submission* and *The Kite Runner*.

Summarizing the analysis of the film *Submission*, it should be noted, that the main character is supposedly portrayed as being oppressed by Islamic culture, who lived in complete isolation, thus reinforcing the negative attitudes and stereotypes in society towards Muslims, especially women. However, the subject of *Submission*, feminism or the oppression of women was never the main subject of discussion, on the contrary, it was Islamic radicalism, extremism and terrorism. Meanwhile, after analyzing the film *The Kite Runner*, it should be noted, that the plot reveals stereotypes about Islam and Muslims that exist in both Western and Eastern societies. Oriental characters are portrayed in the film as much lower in morality and values than, for example, Westerners. The film’s episodes emphasize the fanatical consequences of both terrorism and Islamism, and the relationship between the main characters reflects the orientalist culture of Afghanistan.

Keywords: orientalism, stereotypes, “Submission”, “The Kite Runner”, representation, Islam, muslims, Islam-related films, E. Said, media, Netherlands, discourse analysis.

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1. Introduction

More than 30 years have passed since E. Said wrote the book “Orientalism”, in which the author completely deconstructed his approach to the Orient. His assumptions have provoked controversial debates that remain relevant today. First of all, due to the fact that the theory of the “clash of civilizations” is gaining more and more followers, and orientalist discourse has a strong influence on Western culture, both in the academic and artistic fields [1]. Today, the focus is more on not only Orientalism, but also on post-Orientalism, in which new cultural colonialism is gaining tremendous momentum. Moreover, Orientalism remains one of the most important concepts in post – colonial studies, which require detachment from the dominant Western approach to the Orient. Finally, an increasingly prominent new field of study, called neo-orientalism, where the dichotomy between the East and the West was prepared and transferred to the global system level. This dualism has been more or less influenced by increasing globalization. This is important in a world, where communication networks reduce the distance between continents, where a crisis in one region of the world can easily affect another. It is important to take a broader look at today’s expression of Orientalism, both in politics and in the media, and in social relations between different cultures.

It is assumed, that films have become one of the most important sources for people to get to know foreign nations, cultures and religions. For this reason, the analysis helps to understand the reproduction of stereotypes not only in the media, but also in popular culture (cinema). Screenings, that is based on a certain perspective, have an impact on the assessment and attempt

to understand other cultures. The construction of identity in any society is inseparable from power and the desire to dominate the world [2]. The separation between West and East in international relations has always occupied an important place. The never-ending struggle between these two confrontations determines the destinies of many people [3]. In the 21st century, there is an increasing return to criticism of the Western world and its image of Muslims and Islam, so the issue remains relevant today.

Popular culture (media, TV, cinema) presents and reproduces stereotypes: “biased information inevitably becomes incorporated into “general knowledge” and the schemas that the audience forms about stereotypical groups” (p. 251) [4]. Once formed, such biased characteristics can be consistently portrayed in movies. This, in turn, can influence subsequent perceptions, decisions, or behaviors about the social group [5]. Moreover, when examining stereotypes of certain cultures, we inevitably face contradictions, arising from the intertwined interests, lack of intelligence and cognition. Thus, this article analyzes the expression of stereotypes, intertwined with the dominant images of Muslims and Islam. In this study, stereotypes will emerge as a consequence of Western imagination, undoubtedly associated with power and politics.

The Kite Runner is a 2007 drama film, directed by American director Marc Forster (based on a 2003 novel by Khaled Hosseini of the same name). In the film, the story of a small boy named Amir, who grows up in a wealthy family in Kabul, is depicted. The story takes place against the backdrop of turbulent events, ranging from the collapse of the monarchy in Afghanistan through Soviet military intervention, the mass exodus of Afghan refugees to Pakistan, to U.S. politics and the Taliban regime [6].

The main character of the film, Zekeria Ebrahimi, after the film’s screening, was constantly persecuted in Kabul for portraying the Hazara Shia community as weak and for portraying the Pashtun Sunni community as bad and cruel [7].

Meanwhile, the short film *Submission* was made in the Netherlands in 2004 and produced and directed by Theo van Gogh, and the story was written by Ayaan Hirsi Ali (former member of the Dutch People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy). The film tells the story of four fictional characters, played by one actress wearing a veil, but in her naked body one can notice the written verses of the Qur’an. The main actors are Muslim women, who have experienced violence. The film was aired on Dutch public TV channel (VPRO) (29 August 2004). On 2 November 2004 Van Gogh was killed by a second-generation Moroccan-born immigrant with Dutch citizenship. A letter, thrown on the victim’s body, was condemning the director’s film for expressing a negative attitude towards Islam (calling for jihad against unbelievers, against America, Europe, the Netherlands and Hirsi Ali himself. Tens of thousands gathered in central Amsterdam in honor of Van Gogh [8]. The murder in the Netherlands sparked media discourse on the Muslim threat and terrorism, with aggressive demonstrations against Muslims in the Netherlands, the burning of mosques, the bombing of Eindhoven’s Islamic school, and the film’s lack of opportunity to promote on the problems of Muslims [9]. The murder of Theo van Gogh shifted the focus from oppression, experienced by women, to a heinous crime.

2. The aim, goals and methods of the study

The aim of this paper – to find out how Muslims and Islam are presented in *The Kite Runner* and *Submission*, based on E. Said’s (1978) Orientalism and how the murder of Theo van Gogh affected public attitudes toward Muslims. **The goals** of the study are:

- 1) to analyze the concept of Orientalism and stereotypes, connections with the media and the influence of popular culture on their expression;
- 2) to find out the role of the Muslim minority in the process of constructing social reality (stereotypes);
- 3) to analyze how Muslims and Islam are presented in the films *The Kite Runner* and *Submission*. **The object** of this work is the representation of Muslims in the movies and the depiction of Theo van Gogh’s murder in the press.

Methods: This work uses the method of analysis of scientific literature, which will help to reveal the concept, the most important features and main characteristics of Orientalism and ste-

reotypes. Discourse analysis and a comparative method are also used to show the links between Orientalist imagination and film-based stereotypes in Western societies, or in other words, the links between Muslim representation in films and the evaluation of Muslims and Islam in society after Theo van Gogh's assassination.

3. Theoretical background

The Concept of Orientalism in E. Said's Book "Orientalism"

"They can not represent themselves - they must be represented" (p. 25) [1] – famous 20th century intellectual – E. W. Said begins his work "Orientalism", one of the most important works to be considered a strong basis for post-colonial studies in the Western world. Orientalism is portrayed as a work of European illusions, an unrecognized and alien object, finally formed in the 19th century, when colonialism gained its greatest momentum. Britain established itself in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, and France began to dominate the territories of present-day Syria and Lebanon. They were the main states that have carried out both political, cultural and even social expansion. Of course, after World War II, they abandoned their positions to America, but the approach towards the Orient remained unchanged.

There are three main paradigms of Orientalism. First, Orientalism is identified as an area of academic study. Scholars use Orientalism as the prism, through which the Orient is seen, explored, and evaluated. It is a system, used to understand the very different, mysterious and "intimidating" people of the Middle East, *static and underdeveloped* society [1]. In this study, we will not apply this paradigm, so we can move on to the second.

"Orientalism as a Way of Thinking Based on the Ontological and Epistemological Distinction of the Orient and Usually the Occident" (p. 28) [1] is the second meaning of the concept of Orientalism. Thus, Orientalism can be described as an ideology, related to the idea of Western and Islamic dualism. For many centuries, myths, stories, descriptions of people, living in the Orient, their customs, traditions or simply lifestyle have been created without any evidence or research. There is a constant emphasis on a certain hierarchy – Europe's unquestionable advantage and the deplorable backwardness of the Orient. This "law" was universally accepted by Western society, which lacked research based confirmation and whose denial was rejected. All this led to the dualism of East and West. Denys Hay (1968) raised the idea of a European collective identity, defining "us" Europeans as the opposite of "others", in other words, non-Europeans. Constructing a European identity, inseparable from the dichotomy: "We" and "Others". By constructing their own identity, each society creates antagonism – an irreconcilable contradiction between 2 subjects. Orientalism is the result of long-term interests that sought not to critically evaluate, but to confirm irreconcilable opposing identities [10, 11]. Orientalist knowledge arises from trying to interpret the "Other", an alien, unfamiliar reality, but Said emphasizes that Orientalism intertwines with other political, intellectual, cultural, moral powers, and various interests that shape our view [1].

The third meaning of the concept of Orientalism is often singled out – Orientalism as a corporate institution, the main task of which is to find solutions to problems, related to the Orient. In other words, to formulate statements, describing the Orient, to identify the attitude, to describe it, and ultimately to manage it. As E. Said put it, "This does not mean that Orientalism unilaterally defines what can be said about the Orient, but it includes many intertwined interests that we always inevitably encounter when talking about a specific universe called the Orient" (p. 27) [1].

Thus, in Orientalism, an important role was given to the academic world, which formed statements, prejudices, certain stereotypes. Western academia has described a foreign and unfamiliar Eastern culture, manipulating people's belief that everything written is unquestionably true. The East was weak and backward part of the world, underestimating the Occidental intellectual superiority and true interests. The East belonged to a subordinate race, and uncivilized regions, such as the East had to be annexed by the advanced states [1]. In summary, stereotypes about the Orient, its people, and culture have been presented as unchanging and unquestionable.

Orientalism is based on the opposition of the West (imperial metropolis) and the East (colonial periphery), where special importance is given to imperialism and colonialism. Orientalism,

above all, is a tool for justifying Western dominance in the Orient. It was a British and French cultural project, an initiative, driven by expansive motives and manifested as the formation of power and awareness of the Orient. Eastern states are seen as colonies that must be ruled by Europeans. The reason for that is “Orientals”; do not know self-government, so it is in their own interest to be governed so. It was an institutionalized Western instrument to dominate and govern the Orient, as Europe has historically always held a position of power and dominance over the Orient. The weak and less developed regions, such as the Orient, was considered favorable and suitable for colonization. The most important thing is not what people think, but the fact that their worldview can be constructed. E. Said’s approach is based on the fact that the meaning of a descriptive object does not exist before the description, so Orientalist discourse performs not only the function of representing the Orient, but also the function of creation [11]. In summary, it can be said, that Orientalism as an institution plays a legitimizing role and justifies the Occident’s position, dominance and attitude towards the East as a territory, in which the goals and interests, set by the great European empires, can be realized.

One of the main features of Orientalism is the defined space, in which the Orient is located. The change in Western attitudes allowed us to look at the Orient as a geographical space that could be explored, recycled, or even protected. Orientalists have the right to classify the Orient, to present their observations not only to Western society, but also to help the Orient himself to understand himself. Thus, Orientalism is equated with a territory, geographically located in the Middle East. In 19th century Europe, the Orient meant nothing more than the Arab world or the East in general. Most importantly, this concept did not cover regions of the world, such as India, China or the Far East. Central to the search for links between Orientalism and Islamophobia was the fact that Orientalism did not focus on immigrants or their communities in Europe, as at that time, this was completely irrelevant, the world was not yet covered by global phenomena [12]. Thus, Orientalism considers the Orient to be immutable in terms of both time and space, but territory, as a fundamental element of classical Orientalism, becomes less significant.

The phenomenon of fear is important in analyzing the features of classical orientalism. As Orientalism puts it: “However, Europe has more often felt fear than disrespect. After the death of Muhammad in 632, the military, cultural and religious hegemony of Islam grew tremendously” (p. 90) [1]. The preconceived notion of Christian thinkers, seeking to know Islam, was the search for analogous phenomena. Moreover, in traditional Orientalism, the state was stronger than society, and therefore despotism towards Muslims was a universally accepted norm [13]. In reality, however, in 19th-century Orientalist discourse, the phenomenon of fear is connected with the entire Orient and its culture, not with Islam as a religion. At that time, there was no critical discourse – the threat of Islam. There was another phenomenon – xenophobia (hostility to foreigners, hatred of another culture or civilization). The West despises and describes the Orient as eccentric, backward, and passive. It is despotic and lacks progress. Its progress and values are comparable to the West, so it inevitably becomes an “other” competitor. This approach was unchanging and based exclusively on one aspect – the opposite of the modern world – the West [1].

Analyzing the relationship between the Orient and the Occident, another feature is described – the incompatibility of civilizations. Alienation to Islam reinforced the image that European culture was superior, and antipathy was directed to the entire Orient. Islam is given the role of a very dangerous representative. In the West, it has become a universally accepted component of Orientalism. Because of its historical ties to both Christianity and Judaism, Islam has always raised fears that Islamic civilization will oppose the Christian West. The representations of Orientalism in relation to Islamic civilization acquired a new power that served the aforementioned colonial interests. Naming an Oriental or a Muslim was an evaluative decision – the Oriental belonged to a subordinate race. Moreover, Orientalism considers the Orient to be immutable in space and time. Similarly, Orientalism expresses ideas about Islam and the supposed, Muslim resistance to change [1]. Western culture has always looked at the Orient, especially Islam, with a distrust that has permeated the artificially constructed identity of the enemy and that has hindered seeing the true Orient.

The concept of stereotypes, key features and key characteristics

Stereotypes are “cognitive schemes, used by social actors to process information about others” (p. 239) [14]. They not only reflect beliefs about the characteristics of group members, but also provide information about social roles. In other words, how members of a particular group are linked by specific characteristics. Stereotypes create expectations about other individuals and are therefore treated as a “preconceived notion of behaviors and traits that conform to stereotypes” (p. 7) [15]. These are the beliefs that all members of a group share “the same characteristics, attitudes, and living conditions” [16]. Thus, stereotypes are simplified representations of social groups that reject any diversity or, in other words, difference between members of the same group (national minorities, women, etc.) [17].

Stereotypes can be perceived as a kind of social reality belief system about specific social groups. The author [18] mentions the power of myth, where myth becomes part of the communication system. In other words, myths embrace social/cultural differences and make these differences natural and universally understood. It can be argued, that racial stereotypes are a manifestation of racial myths that exist only because individuals interact with each other. Based on empirical evidence, the media portrays specific social groups in stereotypical ways that can affect our thinking, feelings, and behavior [19]. For example, one group is consistently portrayed negatively: Arabs and the Middle East [20]. Stereotypes in the media or in popular culture (such as cinema) are presented to justify, shape, reinforce, or perpetuate hostility and are therefore conducive to racism [5]. According to the researcher [21], the information we receive from the media leads to the creation of stereotypes that help simplify our environment. Therefore, the media can act as a socio-cultural agent or a source of stereotypical information about certain groups.

The association process is defined as “self-activation of mental associations in memory” (p. 221), so stereotypes are defined as the consequence of automatic associations between a group (e. g., a minority group) and characteristics, attributed to it (e. g., crime) [22]. In the West, for example, Islam has become a symbol of problems with ethnic minorities and immigration. Public debate focuses on how to force Islamic groups to assimilate and restrict the rights of Muslim minorities [23, 24], argues that stereotypes depend on how groups interact with each other, how members of different social groups interact in the real world. Imaginations, held by people, are formed from images and information, found in the media. Popular culture is often seen as a mediator that conveys an accurate picture of the world [19]. For example, racial stereotypes in the media or cinema can influence our interpretations to support a dominant racist myth. Automatically repeated stereotypes may perpetuate lies and dominant perceptions of a particular race, and certain linguistic signs may reinforce such interpretations and perceptions [25].

[26] note that people’s attitudes are formed according to the way the media (especially press and television) are presented. The media draws attention to a specific problem, creates public perceptions of public figures, constantly presents objects and phenomena by presenting what individuals should think about, know about, and have some understanding of. However, not many studies have been conducted that could synthesize all of these elements into a research hypothesis and test it, based on empirical data.

The role of the Muslim minority in the process of constructing social reality (stereotypes)

[27] described a minority as a group of people who, because of their physical and cultural characteristics, are distinguished from others in the society, in which they live, and who therefore consider themselves to be subject to collective discrimination. This removes minorities from full participation in social life. The existence of a minority in society means the existence of a dominant group with a higher social status and greater privileges.

According to the theory of social identity, the identity of an individual is linked to the main characteristics of the social groups, to which he/she him/herself belongs. Thus, in order to maintain self-awareness, people are encouraged to create a distinction between “we” and “they” (“in-group-outgroup”), which is particularly useful for the “ingroup”. In most cases, the characteristics, associated with the negative characteristics of the outgroup, are very conducive to discrimination

and social exclusion. Internal group identification can be strong enough to change individual orientations [28]. When stereotypes are created, individuals are perceived by general group characteristics more than by their personal characteristics [29]. Categorical membership, defined by clearly noticeable differences between groups, is most noticeable in terms of racial/ethnic differences.

Thus, the most common form of social categorization is between “us” and “them”. People usually see members of the inner group, that is, “us” more positively than members of the outer group, which is “them”, and also add more value to the inner group, compared to the outer. This occurs when group membership is based on long-term cultural or social relationships [30]. Thus, when a conflict exists between groups, the perception of an external group member becomes negative. Intergroup relationships are often characterized by negative emotions, directed to the outside group ([31, 32]). The minority status of a group is a cause of prejudice and discrimination, as the stereotype of a minority is an image, in which the characteristics are unfavorable to the whole group. In other words, it is a learned behavior and an institutionalized model [33]. Prejudice by a dominant group against a minority group leads to discrimination. This can be seen as a majority group that does not allow minority members to have the same opportunities or rights as the majority group.

The opportunities of the Muslim minority in constructing social reality (and thus changing the negative stereotypes formed) are limited. This is connected with their position in society [34] defined social exclusion as “a condition, in which individuals or communities are geographically part of that society, but feel unable to participate in the normal activities of citizens because, according to their understanding,

- a) conditions and institutions exist to actively limit or deny such participation;
- b) public and/or government institutions portray them as “outsiders” [35].

Individuals or communities may feel that society and institutional structures prevent them from participating in public life as citizens. It can be argued, that in such a case, the possibilities of constructing social reality are limited. In other words, social exclusion can be perceived as the limited opportunities of a certain section of society to participate in the political, social, cultural or economic life of the state [35]. The minority community cannot convey its position, eliminate the stereotypes that exist in society through the media. A minority does not have sufficient political, cultural, or economic capacity to exert any influence [36].

The common experiences that unite nations are often conveyed through specific social interactions and the media. Minorities receive information about how people treat them. From the media (press, television, films), they receive signals of inclusion/exclusion, aimed at minority groups or other individuals, which in turn leads to their perception of the social inclusion or exclusion of the group [37].

According to [38], prejudices are usually determined by stereotypes - entrenched and inflexible descriptions of people. It is ingrained in cultural attitudes and is difficult to break down even when it strongly distorts reality. Many minorities are distinguished from the rest of society by ethnic characteristics (this is especially true for individuals of Asian descent). The author identifies a form of “new racism”, in which hierarchies of superiority are created in accordance with the cultural values of the majority. Groups that have left the majority may be marginalized or portrayed negatively, when they refuse to assimilate. This is also closely related to ethnocentrism (the habit of judging another culture in relation to one’s own culture). Strangers are considered barbarians, morally unworthy. The closedness of groups is created by applying methods of social exclusion, which reinforce the differences between one or another ethnic group. In accordance with this, members of minority groups have a strong sense of solidarity that results from shared exclusion [38].

The stereotypical portrayal of Arabs and Muslims has received more attention since the events of 9/11, but this has been going on for many years. It has some basis in the Orientalist discourse. Said explained this concept in his book *Orientalism*. It is a volatile imagination and a boldly polarized geography that divides the world into two unequal parts, the larger – the “other” called the Orient and the other, also known as the “our” world and called the Occident or the West [39]. Popular concepts are associated with Arabs and Muslims: insane dictators, ruthless, violent, insidious, barbaric, hateful of Jews and Americans, and with secret intentions to destroy America [40]. Moreover, the

terrorist stereotype, while significant before the events of 9/11, was only universally acknowledged after the 9/11 attacks: “(1) all the terrorists of 9/11 were Arabs and Muslims; (2) because most Arabs are Muslims; and (3) because terrorists emphasize the religious motivation for their actions; (4) all Arabs and Muslims can be terrorists” (p. 24) [41]. In summary, therefore, existing stereotypes of Muslims are deeply rooted in people’s imaginations.

4. Materials and Methods

The Representation of Muslims and Islam in Western Movies

This study seeks to elucidate how Muslims and Islam are presented in the films *Submission* and *The Kite Runner* based on E. Said’s (1978) “Orientalism”. The main research methods are discourse analysis and comparative analysis. The main research question is descriptive in nature. For this reason, the analysis is based on a clear research tool to provide adequate conclusions.

The study sources were selected based on the following criteria:

1. The storyline relates to the Middle East.
2. Popularity of films: ratings in the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) and/or number of views.
3. Availability of films on the online platform.
5. Film genre (looking for films that belong to different genres).
6. Statistics on Muslim minorities in Western countries, their position, relations with the number of majority of the society.

Thus, the following films were selected as the main sources of research under the conditions listed above:

The Kite Runner is a 2007 drama film, directed by American-born director Marc Forster (based on a 2003 novel of the same name by Khaled Hosseini). The story of a small boy named Amir, who grew up in a wealthy family in Kabul, is depicted in the film. The story takes place on the background of turbulent events, ranging from the collapse of the monarchy in Afghanistan through Soviet military intervention, the mass exodus of Afghan refugees to Pakistan, to the U.S. policies towards the region and the Taliban regime [6].

Meanwhile, the short film *Submission* was created in the Netherlands in 2004, produced and directed by Theo van Gogh, and the screenplay was written by Ayaan Hirsi Ali (former member of the Dutch People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy). The film tells the story of four fictional characters, played by one actress wearing a veil with verses of the Qur’an can be seen on her naked body. The main actors are Muslim women, who have experienced violence. On 2 November 2004 Van Gogh was killed. A letter, thrown on the victim’s body, was condemning the director’s film for expressing a negative attitude towards Islam [8]. The murder in the Netherlands has sparked media reaction over the Muslim threat and terrorism. The assassination of Theo van Gogh eliminated any opportunity to foster a meaningful dialogue, and the focus was shifted from the oppression, experienced by women, to a heinous crime.

The analysis of scientific literature helps to reveal a broader context, to provide generalizations, so the number of films is limited to two in order to compare two different films that belong to different genres.

This article analyzes the expression of stereotypes in films, based on the main features of Orientalism, described in E. Said’s work “Orientalism”:

1. Justifies the hegemony of the West (dominance and attitude towards the East as a controlled territory).
2. The phenomenon of fear (threat of Muslims and Islam, predisposition to violence, characterized by despotism).
3. Incompatibility of civilizations (enemy identity, value attitude towards the West).
4. Dichotomy between members of the “ingroup” and the “outgroup” [1].

The concept of Orientalism and stereotypes and their manifestations in films are analyzed using **discourse analysis** as the most important method of data collection and analysis. One of the reasons why the discourse analysis was chosen that the discourse analysis is a tool which helps to

analyse the language, used in the text, and to reveal a certain value orientation by representing or stereotypically depicting specific groups (religious, national minorities). The statements of certain groups (politicians, activists, representatives of dominant or oppressed groups) can penetrate the discourse and become an acceptable part of the structure [42]. The basic premise is that any film, as well as culture, is made up of certain constructions, elements, arranged in a specific form. In other words, cinematographic analysis can be based on the common experience that the worldview in films is constructed as close as possible to reality or the real world.

While discussing the results of the analysis, there is presented the plot lines of the films, the corresponding scenes and dialogues. This is related to the discourse analysis, as not only visual information is analyzed, but also verbal information plays an important role in the arguments, related to the representation/discourse of Islam and Muslims on these scenes. This is based on the concept of Orientalism, described in the theoretical part, the concept of stereotype and the ability of the Muslim minority to represent “themselves”.

As described in the book [43], discourse models are theories (including images, structures, and storylines) that are often overlooked by viewers or readers (in other words, subconscious structures), because they relate to individual, personal experiences, that is why such structures are used to understand the world. In this context, discourse is associated with a pattern of the arrangement of certain words, symbols, images, thoughts, time, or even place. For this reason, data collection for discourse analysis takes into account the language (dialogues), used in the films, as well as the images displayed, the time indicated, the context, or the space chosen. It is also important to answer the question of how language used in certain situations can lead to perceptions of certain scenes.

The validity of the arguments can be judged to be appropriate, but questioned because our samples are not randomly selected [44]. However, the scenes and dialogues are selected on the basis of non-personal observations, but the theoretical part analyzes the scientific literature, related to stereotypes, Orientalism, Islam and Muslim representation. However, in order to replicate the study and analyze the different scenes, it is likely that the results of the study may differ. The study does not call into question ethics, as films do not change (in other words, our observation and analysis do not change the structure of the film, or in sociological terms, “behavior”, such as how it could be in the context of groups).

Research questions: This research aims to answer the following questions:

1. How Muslims and Islam are portrayed in the films *Submission* and *The Kite Runner*.
2. What stereotypes are attributed to Islam and Muslims and how perceptions of this religious group are created in films based on Said’s work “Orientalism”.
3. What context (historical, social, cultural, etc.) leads to the under-representation of Islam and Muslims in films.
4. How this representation relates to the film industry in presenting Islam and Muslims in a Western cultural environment.

Research ethics

Maintaining impartiality in data collection and analysis is difficult in qualitative research. When it comes to Islamic and Muslim stereotypes, we already have some images, related to behavior or appearance. So it would be unethical to say that our pre-defined ideas do not reflect how we interpret the results of the study. However, ethical principles are based on four main areas. As for the first principle of “harm of participants”, this is not a problem for this study, as participants are not real characters (i.e. real people). Based on the argument that “participants” are not real people, but are analyzed only in the context of stereotypes and representation, other issues, related to “lack of consent”, “invasion of privacy” and “deception”, are examined, leave no area for doubt [45].

To ensure the objectivity of the study, the author declares that there is no conflict of interest. No personal or financial relationships with other people or organizations and no personal beliefs, which could be significant for objectivity or motivation to interpret the data accordingly. The analysis of the data collected and the presentation of the information are in no way related to the author’s ethical or other beliefs or belonging to a particular ethnic, social, religious or any other group.

5. Results

Analysis of Marc Forster's film *The Kite Runner* in the context of stereotyping

The Kite Runner is one of Marc Forster's famous films, based on Khaled Hosseini's best-seller. Amir lived in the suburbs of Kabul and had a friend, Hassan, who belonged to the lower (hazara) class. The children grew up together, flying kites together, but Amir betrayed his friend and lately it was given a chance to correct his mistakes.

As a child, Amir fled to the United States with his father, so he is not really a foreigner and is treated as "other", hostile or foreign to Western culture. Meanwhile, the other main character, Assef, is portrayed as "inhumane", "barbaric" and "foreign". This creates a contrast, as his role embodies the opposite of liberal Western ideology. Therefore, it can be said, that Western viewers find themselves in the framework of orientalist stereotypes. In other words, the Orient (East) continues to be portrayed as barbaric, outmoded, uncivilized, and substandard by Western standards. Orient characters (Assef, his friends) are always portrayed as far lower in morals and values than, for example, Westerners. The main features of the Assef highlight the contrast to make it much easier to emphasize Amir's Western identity. Thus, it can be argued, that the Orient and his people are portrayed in stereotypical ways, emphasizing hostility to the West and their ideological attitudes (usually characterized by inferior moral attitudes).

Meanwhile, the relationship between Amir and his best friend Hassan also reflects the orientalist culture of Afghanistan. Amir belongs to the Pashtun religious group and Hassan to the Hazara group. Historically, relations between these two religious groups have been highly conflicting, with Pashtuns always exploiting representatives of the Hazara (plundering their lands, houses, women) [46]. So Amir actually belongs to a privileged class that occupies a dominant position and is in a higher position in the hierarchy.

Amir's ethnicity is constantly emphasized in their relationship. One of the scenes in the film depicts Hassan, defending his friend Amir (3 older Pashtun boys are going to beat Amir). Assef asks, "how can Amir call Hassan his friend, because he is a hazara, and Afghanistan is a Pashtun land. This "flatness nose" is a hazard. We are the true Afghans, the pure afgans. Their people soil our blood" (author's note – dialogue from the film). Nevertheless, Hassan saves Amir. In summary, ethnicity plays an important role in characterizing Hassan and Amir and in shaping stereotypical attitudes towards the lower class as inferior members of society. This once again shows the difference between "We" and "They" and forces us to return to E. Said and his concept of Orientalism. The social exclusion between Amir and Hassan creates a bipolar relationship between East and West, where the Orient is treated as having no equal status and can therefore be exploited.

Another stereotype emerges in the film: Muslims and Islam are portrayed as inherently prone to violence. For example, the 1998 Hazara massacre is treated as an act, committed in the name of God. Thus, the stereotype is so entrenched to Western audiences that the Muslim religion is violent. In addition, the film depicts another gruesome scene, in which Hassan after a kite-shooting competition is raped by Assef and his gang. Although Amir had the opportunity to stop and save his friend, his desire to win the contest was stronger (by winning this contest he would win his father's love as well). The question is whether this was really the right "price". Hassan is depicted as an object that can be exploited for the benefit of the West, as the Orient belongs by nature to a subordinate race. Hassan's characterization embodies an ethnic minority that can be oppressed and treated as unequal.

The film also reveals stereotypes, deeply rooted in society about career choices. On one scene, there was a celebration of Amir's graduation. His father pronounces a phrase that undoubtedly reveals his expectations: "one day you will be a good doctor" (author's note – dialogue from the film). Amir replies that he does not want to become a doctor, he wants to write. Amir's propensity for creativity and writing, noticed by his father as a child, was very worrying. Amir was different from the other children, he could not defend himself, to fight for himself against those, who insulted him. Even then, Amir's father said, "A child who is unable to defend himself will not become a real man when he grows up" (author's note – dialogue from the film). A similar situation is when Amir meets a general (his father's friend) and he asks what Amir is doing after hearing the answer that he is writing, asked if it is a historical book. When he learns that these are novels, he

contemptuously retaliates that Amir writes “fiction” (nothing serious). It is clearly shown, that certain professions are considered prestigious and universally accepted in society (due to factors such as pay, public recognition or respect). The work or profession of a writer is considered unprofitable, it is hard to imagine that in this way a man could earn enough to support a family. It can be said, that this is another stereotype in the film *The Kite Runner*, when the writer’s profession may be considered honorable, but by no means profitable, as a rare author can expect to live off his work.

It is quite important to mention another episode, when the father is examined by a doctor, when he is ill, but when it turns out that doctor is a man of Russian origin, his services are immediately refused and asked to be replaced. Thus, ethnicity plays an important role and although in public places (especially in the US) this should be seen as unacceptable to the existing social order. But behind it all are historical and “personal grievances”, as Amir’s father is from Afghanistan, where the Soviet Union’s military intervention in 1979 lasted until 1989. His hatred and rude treatment of a doctor of Russian origin is understandable, but nonetheless, it shows deeply ingrained stereotypes and stereotypical thinking in society, because the doctor’s ethnicity or origin is not chosen. The actions of the Soviet Union have nothing to do directly with his personality, choices, behavior, or moral dispositions. Moreover, if he was a physician of American descent, he would have to be treated in exactly the same way, since the Soviet Union was also involved in the military intervention in Afghanistan, as well as the United States. This only confirms that ethnic divisions and stereotypes still exist in society, with some nationalities, being seen as “privileged” and more entitled to respect than others.

Finally, another stereotype prevalent in the West should be discussed: Muslims are treated as terrorists, Islamists or fundamentalists. The second part of the film is filled with images, related to the “horrors” of war, endless massacres and brutal actions of officers. This shapes and strengthens the perception of Western audiences that Islam and Muslims are inherently prone to violence. That this is the daily life of their society – thousands of deaths, endless struggle and aggression. Islam and Muslims are portrayed as a threat to the last 1400 years of attempts to conquer the West, so it is clear that Europe has always felt fear of a “barbaric” and “uncivilized” Orient, rather than respect. The episodes of the film constantly emphasize the aspect of fanaticism, associated with both terrorism and Islam, as those fighting the Soviet Union are portrayed within the framework of absolute fanaticism.

In general, the film is accompanied by a stereotypical presentation of Afghan life (caravans, camels, burqas, etc.). It presents an orientalist culture in Afghanistan, in which religion occupies the most important place in society, thus creating a misconception that the ongoing war and the violence experienced are inevitably related to Islamic religion. In one scene, Amir seems to be forced to pray to a Muslim god, but he makes a fatal mistake – he hesitates, what a true Muslim would never do. There is a certain discrepancy with the stereotype of a “real” Muslim (but this can be explained by the fact that Amir’s cultural identity is not just “Muslim”). Amir’s actions in the East would be treated as sin, but in the West it would be “justified”. The examples, mentioned in the analysis, show that cultural differences play an important role in terms of the expression of stereotypes and their impact on society.

Muslim representation in the film *Submission*

In 2004, the film *Submission* criticized the situation of a woman (Muslim) in Islam, after which the film’s director, Theo van Gogh, was assassinated. The event drew the world’s attention to Islamic extremism, fundamentalism, terrorism, but the film “avoided” critical analysis. For this reason, this paper will explain the representation of “Others” (Muslims with a focus on women) in the context of Orientalistic stereotypes [47] argue that “third world” women often find themselves in an ambiguous situation. Firstly, it is a struggle against gender inequality in their own societies and secondly, against the publicity of universally applicable feminist ideas. The film *Submission*, which depicts a Muslim woman and the tragic events that followed in 2004 in the Netherlands, shows the difficult situation for equality on both sides.

Meanwhile [48] treats this film as an emerging expression of feminism. The screenplay for *Submission* was created by Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali (a former Muslim from Somali)

and independent filmmaker Theo van Gogh. The film criticizes the position of women in Muslim societies. The main character tells the stories of 4 women, during which a depicted text from the Qur'an is engraved on a woman's injured body. The action takes place on an imaginary land – Islamistan. Appearing on Dutch television in August 2004, it may have gone unnoticed like many other short films, but 3 months later Mohammed Bouyeri kills the film's director and draws worldwide attention [49].

The murder in the Netherlands has sparked media debate over the Muslim threat and terrorism. However, the oppression of Muslim women has almost never been the subject of debate. According to a Wall Street Journal reporter [50], this was a brutal “awakening” that opened the Dutch eye to the threat of terrorism. So women's problems and feminist implications were simply forgotten. There were aggressive demonstrations against Muslims in the Netherlands (mosques burned, Eindhoven Islamic school bombed). In the words of the then Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende: “The Netherlands did not fight, it only fought against radicalism” (p. 7) [51]. Thus, in the film *Submission*, feminism or oppression of women did not become the main topic of discussion, but it was Islamic radicalism, extremism and terrorism [48]. Thus, it can be said, that in this case the representation of “Others” (Muslims) is related to the dominant attitude towards this religious minority in a particular society, in other words, the orientalist discourse in the West.

Today, Theo van Gogh – dead, Bouyeri – in a Dutch prison for life, Ali – exiled, and Muslim women face a greater struggle as the director's assassination has further hampered their efforts to integrate into Western society. Van Gogh is considered a victim, Ali is a hero, and the film *Submission* itself is an “image of oppression” of Muslim women. However, in order to understand the film and its aftermath in the Netherlands, the socio-political environment in the Netherlands in 2004, social positions, cultural background, the ideological positions of the three individuals, the role of the media in depicting Islam and Muslims are becoming important. Each of these aspects relates to an asymmetric power relationship, in other words, the relationship of the Muslim minority in the dominant culture in the Netherlands [48].

On the one hand, the film seems to hide a feminist undertone that seeks to draw attention to the oppression of Muslim women. Bouyeri's letter (pinned to van Gogh's chest) shows that the film is interpreted as a public language of hatred, directed against Muslims and Islam in general. It is important to mention Said's “Orientalism” here, as Muslims are portrayed as uncivilized, barbaric and unsuitable for Dutch society. In this way, their oppression and isolation in Dutch society seems to be justified. It is worth noting, that after the year 2000, the integration of the Muslim minority became a major problem. The high level of unemployment among immigrants and cultural conflicts should have led the government to step up its efforts to integrate minorities into Dutch society, but many countries mistakenly believed in the success of Dutch multicultural integration. Indeed, the gap between minorities and indigenous Dutch grew very rapidly [48]. All this can also be seen in the film *Submission*, where the representation of Muslims and Islam is associated with negative attitudes towards immigrant Muslims in society itself.

The stories, narrated by Ali, relate to colonial thinking, paraphrasing the insights, provided by E. Said (1978) in “Orientalism”, that the Orient has always been considered an appropriate object of colonization and that the Orient has always belonged to a subordinate race [1]. Ali is allegedly portrayed as oppressed by Islamic culture. In the script, the woman lives in an uncertain era, in the imaginary land of Islamistan – a land of oppression for women, living in complete isolation, in dark rooms – harems. Imprisoned, powerless and oppressed by their religions. Thus, the film depicts a harem scene – the arrangement of women in harems as a reflection of oriental fantasies. *Submission* has led to the image of Muslim women as experiencing oppression, violence and cruelty. The blurred boundaries between the main characters and the stories they tell contributed to the monolithic representation of the Muslim woman in the film. A Muslim woman is the same everywhere, in other words, their differences are completely irrelevant. The very fact that the film depicts 4 stories and each woman, who had her own name only, became clear when Ali made the script public in 2006, 2 years after Van Gogh's death [48].

Similarly [52] states: “The issue of women arose only as a side part of the Western narrative of Islam. In this way, Europeans continue to pursue colonialism in Muslim states”(p. 150). Ac-

cording to the author, the image of a Muslim woman-victim is presented as a “moral justification” for the Western “civilizing mission” in Muslim cultures (p. 152) [52]. The film *Submission* is very close to the links between this image of the Muslim woman as a victim and the colonial footprint. So when it is said that attempts are being made to save Muslim women from oppression in their own cultures, the film “subjugates” them into a new form of subordination, where another culture (Western culture) should dominate. The main characters in the film reflect the characteristics of children. This reinforces the impression that, like children, these women need the protection of their parents, men, and ultimately Allah, and deep beneath their anger lies the frustration of not being protected.

The assassination of Theo van Gogh has sparked debate over the failed integration of Muslims. The Prime Minister Balkenende described this as an attack on the foundations of the constitutional state and democracy. Liberal Party (VVD) leader Jozias van Aartsen said, “Jihad has come to the Netherlands”, and Deputy Prime Minister Gerrit Zalm has declared “a war against Muslim extremism” [53]. In response to the assassination of van Gogh, the government has taken certain security measures to combat Muslim radicalism (such as the development of a Dutch intelligence and security institution, the strengthening of security and surveillance agencies) [54]. Thus, it can be concluded, that Islam and Muslims are associated with terrorism, Islamism, and with it a threat to liberal Western values. Islam is seen as a source of violence and nuclear weapons. Politicians’ speeches illustrate that Orientalist discourse is still followed in the West, representing Islam, Muslims, and the Orient as a whole.

One of the government’s proposals was that Islam (its practices) should be banned in the public sphere. Starting from the fact that a clear distinction should be made between what is public and private in society. Many opinion leaders have suggested restricting religious activities in general, including Islam. Under this proposal, the wearing of headgear in public institutions and covering the face on the street was to be banned, and it was recommended that no new Islamic school should be established [54]. In summary, therefore, it can be concluded, that Islam is perceived as a threat to the Dutch (Western) society, a source of unwanted immigrants, whose values are incompatible with the principles of liberal Western democracy.

“Jihad” in the Netherlands after Theo van Gogh’s murder?

“Jihad came to the Netherlands”, were the headlines of many press releases. The letter on Van Gogh’s body received a radical reaction to the rhetoric of violence and Islamic fundamentalism. Born in the Netherlands, Bouyeri was considered a “integrated” member of society in all respects: he spoke Dutch at home and took part in local projects, aimed at integrating newcomers. On the one hand, this was seen as an attack on the right to freedom of expression, on the other hand, Van Gogh was killed by a second-generation immigrant with Dutch citizenship, whose integration into society was beyond doubt [55]. All this has encouraged and reinforced the stereotypical view of Islam and Muslims in the West as a community, characterized by violence and hatred.

In general, the long-standing stereotypes of minorities in the Dutch society (first-generation immigrants do not speak Dutch, tend to live in poorer neighborhoods in large cities, etc.) only intensified after the release of the *Submission* and the assassination of Theo van Gogh. After 2004, second-generation Moroccans acquired a negative image of aggression and street crime. The Netherlands has long been associated with progressive values and practices (high standards in education, skilled workforce). Unfortunately, in fact, the Netherlands faced a lack of tolerance, where religious and social practices (mostly associated with domestic violence, female circumcision, anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, etc.) are encountered. Muslims often become “losers” in this intercultural encounter, for example, they experience discrimination at work. In other words, they become “targets” of negative Orientalist stereotypes. Ironically, however, in this tolerant and progressive society, manifestations of alienation prevail among Moroccans and other young people of Muslim descent [55].

The main reason for van Gogh’s assassination was not Islam, but rather the attitudes, expressed in the film. For a long time, when the discussion was about Dutch culture, the focus shifted to liberal values. The results of Jonathan Israel’s analysis of the events surrounding the murder of

van Gogh revealed that the Dutch had forgotten their own history, in which tolerance occupied a large place, but highlighted problems with the education system [9]. However, the real reason is more related to Islam and the situation of Muslims, as well as the problems arising from their integration.

Most of the population were not direct witnesses to van Gogh's murder, so was informed by the media reports. Research, related to the dissemination of news, shows that the dissemination of information depends on the coverage of the event in the media and the persons, entitled to speak in press releases. The more important the event, the less significant the individual characteristics are for understanding the situation. It has long been recognized, that a real-world event can be different from its representation in the media, and especially in the aftermath of a disaster, the media tends to act "through media advertising" as the scale of the event intensifies and expands. It refers to an incident, in which the victim died, and the perpetrator's identity as an Arab/Muslim and responsibility for the incident is clearly assigned, indicating that van Gogh's murder has received significant media attention [56]. Van Gogh's murder sparked interest in news, related to Islam and other similar topics (terrorism and immigration issues).

The reaction was not limited to the Netherlands, but the debate on Muslim integration spread throughout Europe: Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen described the assassination as an attack on Western society; The British newspaper *The Independent* wrote that deteriorating relations between immigrants and locals in the Netherlands could lead to bigger problems across Europe; In the *Frankfurter* newspaper, the *Allgemeine Zeitung* wrote that "militant Islam is dangerous on this continent" while the *Economist* warned that the murder of van Gogh could replace tolerance to intolerance [57].

The film *Submission* allegedly tried to reveal women's lives "beyond the border", but in fact, obscured the perception of their real experiences through orientalist "fantasies". Muslims saw *Submission* not as an invitation from Muslim women to oppose patriarchy, but as an invitation to the entire Western world and Dutch society to crack down on Muslims and tighten their policies towards immigrants. The film had little opportunity to foster a meaningful dialogue on the issues of Muslim women. Murder eliminated that possibility, so the focus was shifted from the oppression, experienced by women, to a heinous crime. Bouyeri's letter (left on the victim's body) suggests that the film is interpreted as a public language of hatred, directed against Muslims and Islam in general [9].

Bouyeri saw the film *Submission* not as an invitation from Muslim women to oppose patriarchy, but as an invitation to the entire Western world and Dutch society to crack down on all Muslims, tighten their policies, isolate and oppress. Bouyeri draws a resemblance between the film *Submission* and Orientalist-colonial discourse. In a letter, Bouyeri says the West was little different from Ali and Van Gogh's "Islamistan". Both monolithic and oppressive, both associated with a colonial footprint. Just as colonial fantasies permeate Ali and Van Gogh's imagination of "Islamistan", so memories of colonialism remain in the Western image that Bouyeri has. In a sense, Bouyeri observed criticism of Islam as part of an ongoing global conspiracy against Muslims [58].

Thus, summarizing the analysis of the film, it can be stated, that two monolithic views "Islamistan" and "West" clashed in the film *Submission*. Murder completely changed the course of subsequent discourse. The film had little opportunity to foster meaningful dialogue, so the focus was shifted to a heinous crime.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of Islam and Muslim representation in movies is still neglected in the communication and other social sciences. Not many studies were investigated across the field of stereotypes, which would be related to the practical use of theoretical knowledge in the context of cinematography, therefore the foundation of this research was to analyze the content of Islam related movies. Cinematography is the most complex and multifaceted form of interaction and involvement, consequently the analysis of movies allows us to gain insights into the hidden stereotypical undercurrents that exist in our society. The analysis of *Kite runner* and *Submission* enables to understand how movies affect society, form its intertwined attitudes or public opinion towards Islam and Muslims,

as well as deepens understanding about expressed or encoded topics, meanings, themes, images, representations that would otherwise be unnoticed. It might determine our own identities and behaviour in real life.

Thus, after analyzing the concept of Orientalism, it can be stated, that representations, which help to form statements, prejudices, stereotypes, play an important role in the phenomenon of Orientalism, but in the modern world, academic representations are replaced by the media and the film industry which, by attributing terrorism to “anti-Western” Islamist movements, forms a negative image of Islam and Muslims. This was also the case in 2004 with the release of the film *Submission*. Stereotypes are cognitive schemes, used by social actors to process information about others. They not only reflect beliefs about the characteristics of group members, but also provide information about social roles. These are beliefs that all members of a group share the same characteristics, in other words, simplified representations of social groups that rule out any difference between members of the same group.

Summarizing the analysis of Marc Forster’s film *The Kite Runner*, it should be noted, that the plot reveals stereotypes about Islam and Muslims that exist in both Western and Eastern societies. Oriental characters are portrayed in the film as much lower in morality and values than, for example, Westerners. The film’s episodes emphasize the fanatical aspect of both terrorism and Islamism (some characters are portrayed as inherently prone to violence). The relationship between Amir and his best friend Hassan reflects the orientalist culture of Afghanistan (Amir belongs to the Pashtun religious group and Hassan – hazara group). In a way that justifies their oppression, separation or isolation in the West.

In summarizing the analysis of the film *Submission*, it should be noted, that the stories, told by Ali, are related to colonial thinking. To paraphrase E. Said’s (1978) insights into “Orientalism”, the Orient has always been considered a suitable object of colonization, and the Orient has always belonged to a subordinate race. Ali is allegedly portrayed as oppressed by Islamic culture, where she lives in complete isolation, thus reinforcing the negative attitudes and stereotypes that exist in society towards Muslims and Islam. However, the film had little opportunity to foster a meaningful dialogue on the issues of Muslim women.

The Dutch public debate on Islam and Muslims, following the assassination of van Gogh, was fueled by the assimilationist discourse, such as Hirs Ali, Wilders, Cliteur and many others, who focused on Islam as the main source of terrorism today, thus contributing to the polarization of Dutch society, creating a clear distinction between “We” and “They”, between “autochthons” and “allochthons”, between “Dutch” and “Muslims”. The subject of *Submission*, feminism or oppression of women has never been the main focus of discussion, on the contrary, it has been Islamic radicalism, extremism, terrorism or “failed” integration.

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